

More aid to come to former IP workers

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The U.S. Department of Labor on Monday granted a federal designation that will expand unemployment benefits for International Paper workers who lost their jobs when the company closed its Bastrop paper mill in November.

About 500 former IP workers could be eligible for the Trade Adjustment Assistance program, which provides training, job search and relocation allowances, income support and other services to displaced employees and their families.

"I'm very pleased that the Labor Department approved the Trade

Adjustment Assistance application and that IP's Bastrop employees will have the opportunity to qualify for assistance," U.S. Sen. David Vitter, R-La., who announced the designation, said. "These families are in a very, very difficult situation through no fault of their own, and I will continue to work with local and state officials to identify other avenues to try and find additional help for the community."

The state applied for the Trade Adjustment Assistance on Dec. 1, shortly after International Paper announced it would close its Louisiana Mill in Bastrop.

"That's definitely going to be a huge help," Bastrop Mayor Clarence Hawkins said. "I've

been getting calls every day from workers who wanted to know the status of this application.

"This is going to make them extremely happy. It's going to give them hope and encouragement and help relieve some of the tension and burden they're facing."

Louisiana Workforce Commission Secretary Tim Barfield said Trade Adjustment Assistance should provide a significant boost to the employees.

"It's one more group of services that will be available to help them get back into the work force," Barfield said. "To me, the biggest benefit is access to re-training."

Barfield said the benefits will last

for two years.

U.S. Rep. Rodney Alexander, R-Quitman, and U.S. Sen. Mary Landrieu, D-La., also lobbied the Labor Department to grant the assistance, which is designed to help workers whose jobs were lost because of foreign competition.

"For decades, these workers have given so much to IP and to the community," Alexander said. "It is imperative that we reach out to the employees of this plant and do everything we possibly can to ensure that their basic needs are met. My staff and I are available to help with this assistance."